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Rāmānuja at 1000: The Heritage and Promise of the Study of Rāmānuja in a Christian-Hindu Comparative Theology

A Response to the Panel Papers by
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ABSTRACT: This brief essay is a response to the essays collected in this issue of the journal, based on the 2017 AAR panel honoring Rāmānuja at his 1000th birth anniversary. The response highlights key features of each essay as giving us insights into the theology of Rāmānuja and his place in the Western study of Hinduism. The response ends with some reflections on the future of Rāmānuja studies, suggesting the agenda before the next generations of scholars.

It was fitting to honor the millennial anniversary of Rāmānuja by a panel cosponsored by the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies and the Comparative Theology Group of the American Academy of Religion (AAR). So much might be said on such an occasion, following old and new approaches to Rāmānuja, and we are lucky to have heard the papers published in this issue of the *Journal*. Here I can only highlight some

particular and interesting points made by our authors.

Hugh Nicholson is ever alert to the explicit and hidden but influential influences, even from the 19th and earlier 20th century, that still influence us today. His paper valuably draws us back into one of the most famous and early uses of Rāmānuja for comparative purposes by way of attention to the example of Rudolph Otto, who figured prominently in Hugh's first book, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*. There Hugh investigated why Otto, in *Mysticism East and West*, was so interested in making use of Śaṅkara in rethinking the mysticism of the West. This time, Nicholson turns to Otto's work on Rāmānuja, asking why Otto studied Rāmānuja so seriously over time. He notes that Otto presents Rāmānuja as a natural and worthy adversary for Śaṅkara, the Indian theistic alternative to nondualism. As a result, "the

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dispute between Śāṅkara and Rāmānuja takes on almost mythic proportions in Otto's rendering. The two adversaries symbolize the perennial antagonism, reenacted throughout the history of religions, between, on the one hand, an austere, world-denying mysticism centered on an impersonal and incomprehensible Absolute and, on the other, faith in the living, personal God of religious devotion." In this light interest in Rāmānuja makes sense, for the scholar of Hindu theologies, but also for the scholar of the two kinds of mysticism in the West; looking to India, we see these things with a fresh eye.

Otto's diligent study of Rāmānuja and his school in the end still feeds back into Otto's own Christian theological agenda, where his prior intentions as a theologian and what he discovers stand in tension: "When we widen our focus from Rāmānuja's authored works to those of the larger Vaiṣṇava movement of which he was a part, the second feature of comparative theology exemplified by Otto — namely, the use of comparison as a heuristic of theological discovery — comes clearly into view. Otto's use of comparison as an instrument of theological discernment occurs, perhaps unexpectedly, in the context of his unabashedly apologetic concern with demonstrating the superiority of the Christian religion." The apologetic concern may appear to weaken the comparative discernment, but it also fueled Otto's extraordinary work on Rāmānuja.

John Carman's "Expanding and Refining Christian Interpretations of Rāmānuja" — a bonus to this issue of the journal, reaching far beyond John's modest opening remarks at the panel. We are most fortunate to have this thoughtful and comprehensive reflection by the scholar who has, by his *Theology of Rāmānuja*, done more than anyone to bring Rāmānuja to the attention of modern scholars

of Hinduism and comparative theology, myself included. His essay is impressively comprehensive regarding issues related to the Christian reception of Rāmānuja, touching insightfully but in a still broader perspective on many of the points raised in the various essays and even in his response of mine as well. As befits a scholar with such great experience over so many decades, Carman's essay is also wonderfully autobiographical here and there, for instance regarding his encounter with Professor M. Yamunacharya, grandson of the great Alondavilli Govindacharya, pioneer in bringing Śrīvaiṣṇavism to the attention of the English-reading audience. Blessed with the longest memory among us —and our enduring link to a fading past — Carman is strikingly among the most hopeful about the possibilities before us as we contemplate the further study of Rāmānuja.

Four of our papers aim at solid theological contributions — Hindu, Christian, and comparative. We can first take note of Jon Paul Sydnor's paper, perhaps the boldest of the set. Sydnor is diligent in outlining Rāmānuja's teachings on God's body, and he makes a strong argument in favor of taking seriously that position simply on its own theological merits, irrespective of its Hindu religious context. He raises the issue of materiality *in* God (not the Incarnation), and suggests that from Rāmānuja, Christians can learn to accept the idea that God is embodied — even before the Incarnation. He points to the advantages of the distinctive combination of Sanskrit and Tamil sources that characterizes Śrīvaiṣṇavism, the convincing way in which Rāmānuja develops his ideas, and the overall advantages of Rāmānuja's view on God's body: "Since embodiment and transcendence are not logically exclusive, we can have both and the synergistic concept of God that they offer.

Rāmānuja has shown that reason does not demand the disembodiment of God, and that embodiment does not lower God into the limits of our metaphorical language... According to Rāmānuja, divine embodiment is salvific. If he is right, then our acceptance of divine embodiment will help us to celebrate our own embodiment, and the rich relation to God, others, and the cosmos that this embodiment allows.” All of this is quite interesting, and it is right to notice and appreciate the remarkable view of God held by Rāmānuja.

More of course must be to be said regarding how and why Rāmānuja’s insights turn out to affect any particular group of Christians and Christian theologians, helping us in a more fruitful relationship to God. Sydnor offers us many clues, but they beg for specification, regarding the kind of body that God and humans have, and the nature of the limitation experienced by God within time. Since Christian theologians have a variety of views on God, time, matter, and creation, it will also be strategically important to engage specific audiences, if the goal is to change the minds of Christian theologians who do not already agree with Rāmānuja.

Three papers explore in a more complete manner both sides of the comparative project, and represent solid instances of Hindu-Christian theological work drawing on Rāmānuja: Rakesh Peter Dass bringing in Martin Luther, Ankur Barua dialoguing with Augustine, Karl Rahner, and Cyril Veliath, while Martin Ganeri reads Rāmānuja with Thomas Aquinas. They write with a subtlety I need not try to summarize, as they delve richly into the theological possibilities so evident in Rāmānuja’s commentarial works, and some comments will help situate what we are learning here.

Inspired by the coincidence of Rāmānuja’s 1000th anniversary with the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, Rakesh Peter Dass highlights teachings that resonate strongly between Rāmānuja and Luther: the nature of good and bad actions; the problem of merit; the reason for continued action in light of the necessity and sufficiency of grace. Dass’ intent is clear in his overview near the start of the paper. He is convinced of “prefigurements” grounded in “certain shared theological commitments,” since “many of Luther’s arguments on good works are prefigured in Rāmānuja’s teachings on the means to liberation.” Dass spells this out with admirable clarity: “Luther’s echo of Rāmānuja... is threefold in nature. First, the idea of merit or reward-inspired actions preoccupied their respective theologies. Second, their teachings on merit reflect a shared interest in placing the work of a gracious God at the center of soteriology. Third, their occupation with agency and action led them to differentiate proper acts from inappropriate acts, promoting the former over the latter in the face of questions surrounding the salvific value of good works.”

In the end, Dass is content in noticing this convergence of Rāmānuja’s and Luther’s positions: “Due to a shared theological claim that *mokṣa* is a gift that shapes the behavior of recipient and seeker alike, surrender to God has a necessary counterpart in the realm of actions: the performance of proper acts, proper as such due to their genesis and grounding in scripture. Grace never unmoors one from obligations because both Rāmānuja and Luther hold that scriptures enjoin certain actions and forbid others... Rāmānuja’s and Luther’s discourses on proper (and, *ipso facto*, rewarding) acts present us with a shared refrain: do good works as scripture enjoins; surrender this work to God; receive grace and

find liberation.” Why are there these convergences? Since there is no historical influence connecting the two theologians, “the echo of Rāmānuja’s arguments in Luther’s proposals is better understood as the result of certain shared theological commitments in response to a common question: what is the place of actions in God’s salvific saga?”

Ankur Barua speaks to the related issue of grace and free will, examining how one is to look at the God-human relation in the doctrine of creation, shifting to a deeper metaphysical slant, and from there quickly to a mystical perspective: “However, if the doctrine of creation is instead read as emphasising the deep metaphysical-existential dependence of the world on Christ, it could shift the theological focus away from a *temporal* priority of grace over freewill (or vice versa), towards a *mystical* priority of grace which ineffably ‘encapsulates’ human agency.” Barua approvingly cites Cyril Veliath, S.J., that the “antinomy that exists between the agency of the individual *Atman* and that of the Brahman ... stands a better chance of acceptance when observed not from a metaphysical but from a mystical point of view ...” Probing deeper, Barua highlights deeper commonalities that make such comparisons, however inexact they may be, even possible. He refers also to the observation of Martin Ganeri, OP, that traditions share commonalities that signal their struggle to make sense in words of realities that transcend both word and reason.

Ganeri himself brings to his reading of Rāmānuja deep erudition in his own Dominican tradition and in the works of Thomas Aquinas. In his refined and careful exploration, Ganeri explores the possibility of the divinity – divinization – of the human, worked out by a more acute understanding of the reference of words. While in the past cosmology has occupied center stage,

Rāmānuja’s “account of language is also very interesting,” and Christian theologians would do well to “embrace and appropriate his account of identity statements as a resource for expressing the unique relationship that is creation,” and more specifically, the Christian theologian can also “take the likeness identified in Rāmānuja between ordinary language and language in the theological context as a model for expanding the way Christian theology uses language about creation.” This suggestion, perhaps echoing earlier work done by Julius Lipner in *The Face of Truth* (1986), merits close attention by Christian theologians. Ganeri accordingly does important work in showing us what it will take for a Thomist to learn from Rāmānuja in a substantive way, for the sake of new insights into how Thomas’ own theology works. After elaborating Rāmānuja’s theology of language, he observes that for Aquinas words that name what kind of entity something is – as when the name ‘human being’ names what kind of entity Socrates is – have a double meaning: they name both the nature of the entity and the concrete entity itself. Thus, “human being” names both what kind of entity certain things are and names concrete men or women. Rāmānuja then returns, so to speak, to help elaborate the implications of Aquinas’ position: “Moreover, in terms of God and the world, for Aquinas we know in the light both of revelation and human reasoning that the world is created by God. We know that the world has been produced by God and depends on God for its existence at all times. So, we could say that for Aquinas the world has a modal relationship with God, in the wider scope of that term given by Rāmānuja.” Ganeri concludes rather daringly that “a creative appropriation of Rāmānuja’s thought” is “a natural extension of what Aquinas himself does,” which I take as a complement to both

Aquinas and Rāmānuja, and to the well-read comparativist.

Turning in a different direction, Gopal Gupta invites us to look away from Rāmānuja for good reason, even more Rāmānuja's sake: Why Rāmānuja, as opposed to other Vedāntins? Gupta is quite right in asking about the other Vedāntins, and it is satisfying to find this last essay helping us to circle back to Nicholson's paper. Nicholson had showed us that there were specific reasons why Otto turned to Rāmānuja and his Vaiṣṇava tradition, in part due to recognizing in Rāmānuja a voice by which to counter Śaṅkara. Gupta is obliquely reminding us that the times keep changing, and previously persuasive constraints are no longer in place. We do no honor to Rāmānuja or to Vedānta by reading either only in the shadow of Śaṅkara. Since the scholarly community now knows much more now about other Vaiṣṇava traditions, other choices can be made.

Gupta urges us to see that studying other Vedānta theologians will affect the results of comparative theological exchange. This is because other forms of Vedānta — Madhva's, Vallabha's — “offer innovative and distinctive contributions to Vaiṣṇava theology, and taking them seriously would till new ground in comparative theology.” Likewise, after reflecting on the issue of creation *ex nihilo*, Gupta notes that we can see how “a single theological issue — for example, creation *ex nihilo* as developed by Thomas Aquinas” — brings different results such as “emerge when we compare with three influential Vaiṣṇava theologians: Rāmānuja, Madhva, and Jīva Gosvāmi.” Reading Rāmānuja only with Aquinas “highlights and obscures” elements in both their theologies. We miss what might be gained by re-reading them by way of the study of other Vedāntins. Shifting to new vistas, we can listen to Madhva on eternal,

dual creation, or Jīva Gosvāmi on *acintya-bhedābheda*, and glean different theological insights. For instance, “In his writings, Aquinas attempts to embrace two positions: 1) God is the creator of matter in every aspect of its existence and 2) God is not the material cause of the world. It is plausible that the doctrine of *acintya* may be useful to a Thomist in simultaneously maintaining, and making sense of, these two positions.” This is because “in the context of the object-energy relationship, God is the object, and matter is the energy. Although the energy, matter, is created by God in all its being, and is therefore nothing but God, it is inconceivably simultaneously one with, and completely different from, God.”

Of course, it will take time and effort and persuasion to expand the theological and comparative conversation, once the very small set of “go-to masters” is greatly expanded. As traditions break down (or diversify), there will be less and less reason to hold one or another theologian up as *the* paradigm. This widening of the options creates new possibilities, but may also further fragment theological and Hindu-Christian conversations, if there is no consensus on who we should be studying. We must therefore make sure that our Indological work is kept closely connected to the larger theological agenda Hindus and Christians beneficially share.

If so, a converse question arises: How do Hindu theologians decide which Christian theologians to study in depth, if they study a Christian thinker at all? If we want to shake up and enrich the Hindu-Christian theological conversation in the 21st century, the lead on this might fairly be thought to come from Vaiṣṇava scholars, who can do the pioneering work of studying a variety of Christian theologians — not just Augustine or Aquinas,

for instance — so as to draw Christians into new conversations. If a Hindu theologian starts writing about Origen or Bonaventure, Barth or Rahner, for instance, scholars dedicated to the traditions of those thinkers will perk up and pay attention. Here too, the broadening of options will be refreshing, provided we do not give up on the work of finding common ground for our deliberations.

The comparative work proposed by our authors is therefore quite promising. Our authors are continuing a long and honorable tradition in this regard, particularly since they point to specific theological issues and show incrementally how theological progress can be made across religious boundaries.

But some caution too is required. Certainly, we can get far in the study of Rāmānuja, particularly in a Hindu-Christian conversation, by proposing an analogy of scholasticisms that are naturally able to be in conversation with one another. That Rāmānuja can be fruitfully understood as a scholastic thinker is a fine idea, one I have endorsed often enough in my own writing. But in its strength is also some danger, if Rāmānuja is read only, or even primarily, as a scholastic thinker, author of the two *Bhāṣyas* and the *Vedārthasaṃgraha*. We may inadvertently encase Rāmānuja in a genre inaccessible to us today, so that a loss of interest in scholasticism may lead to a loss of interest in reading Rāmānuja, identified as a quintessential scholastic. As the number of scholars interested in and capable of working through scholastic texts decreases, he may swept along by the same decline, left aside by the growing number of those who opt for the study of lived religion, religion in practice, etc.

But there are resources at our disposal to counter the sidelining of Rāmānuja. He is more than a commentator and systematic theologian, and more richly a person and

personality than the *Śrībhāṣya* and *Gītābhāṣya* alone can suggest. In the full canon of his writings are fresh resources that can aid us in seeing him more complexly and, I suggest, in a way more in tune with the diversified nature of the study of religion today. This is not to deny the traditional theological and historical questions raised regarding him, but to expand the field of our study.

First, we can attend more closely to his other works, beginning with the three *Gadyas*, prose prayers of surrender to the Lord, at the temple (*Śrīraṅgagadyam*), eternally in heaven (*Vaikuṇṭhagadya*), and, it seems, simply in one's own heart (*Śaraṇāgatigadyam*). We should similarly pay attention to his most neglected work, the *Nityam*, a manual of the daily worship of the advanced devotee.

As Carman notes, more than 50 years ago Robert Lester worked with Agnihotram Rāmānuja Tathachariar in provoking discussion about the “real Rāmānuja,” the Rāmānuja of history. Lester suggested that since the language and theology of the *Gadyas* differs significantly from what we find in Rāmānuja's major commentaries, scholars must posit that “Rāmānuja” did not write the *Gadyas* or the *Nityam*. Many scholars, traditional and Western (from Carman on) have disagreed with Lester, deciding that his hypothesis ought not outweigh the very long consensus in Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition that the *Gadyas* and *Nityam* are in fact by Rāmānuja. In practice, though, few scholars ever turn to the *Gadyas* or the *Nityam* to fill out their understanding of Rāmānuja. This is omission that harms our understanding of Rāmānuja the person, thinker, monumental leading figure of a long Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition. If we study those works, then we find our way to a more affectively rich and ritually committed Rāmānuja, attentive not just to the theory of karma, but actually to the actual practice of his

